

JAMES C. PALMER, SURGEON GENERAL OF THE NAVY (1872-73)

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JAMES C. PALMER, the third to hold the office of Surgeon General of the Navy and the seventh to be Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, was born in Maryland June 29, 1811, and appointed from that State as an Assistant Surgeon on



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March 20, 1834. His first service was on the frigate *Brandywine*, of the Pacific Squadron. His next duty was on the sloop *Vincennes*, the first vessel of our Navy to circumnavigate the globe. She made her second cruise around the world in 1836 when Dr. Palmer was attached to her. From 1838 to 1842 he was with the celebrated Wilkes

exploring expedition in the South Pacific, as medical officer of the *U.S.S. Relief*, one of the squadron with Admiral Wilkes which returned from Callao by way of the Sandwich Islands and Australia. He was commissioned Surgeon October 27, 1841 and his service on the *Vandalia*, afterwards lost in the Samoan hurricane in 1889, was on the *Niagara* during the Atlantic cable expedition in 1857. A manuscript order and organization book of the *Vandalia* was recently offered for sale by a well-known book store which contained a complete set of orders for the internal administration of the ship, discipline, drills, precautions against fire, and the duties of each person on board. This was written entirely in the hand of Dr. Palmer, and the commanding officer not only attests this fact but also that the surgeon and three other officers, one of whom was Lieutenant William Herndon, the explorer, had assisted with their recommendations and advice.

From 1858 to 1860 Dr. Palmer served on the *U.S.S. Macedonian* of the Mediterranean Squadron. His next duty was thus of a most varied character and he was a member of three of the most famous scientific expeditions made by our Navy. There is no question but that he was entitled to the reputation of being a real seagoing doctor and after this last cruise he fully

deserved the period of shore duty which he began at the Naval Academy in 1861.

Palmer, who later was to succeed Feltz as Surgeon General of the Navy, also followed him as Fleet Surgeon taking over that duty in the Gulf Squadron under Admiral Farragut in 1863. He participated in the battle of Mobile Bay on August 5, 1864 and was concerned with the temporary enlargement of the naval hospital at Pensacola which was used for the care of the wounded after that engagement. It was maintained as the principal hospital for the fleet in Gulf waters from 1863 to 1865.

After the close of the Civil War, Dr. Palmer was at the Naval Hospital, New York where he remained until 1869. He was on duty at Newport, Rhode Island from 1870 to 1872. He was appointed Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery by President Grant on June 10, 1872, and held office until June 29, 1873. Thus two successive Surgeons General of the Navy after the Civil War had followed one another as Fleet Surgeons with Admiral Farragut. Surgeon R. G. Dean was Assistant Chief of Bureau under Dr. Palmer.

The naval hospital in Yokohama, Japan, destroyed by the earthquake of 1873 and not rebuilt, was extended and completed during Palmer's term of office to provide for the Asiatic Squadron. He also urged the rebuilding of the naval hospitals at Pensacola, Florida and Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In recommending this, he says in the annual report of the Surgeon Gen-

eral for 1871, "As Pensacola is the only proper harbor for the Gulf Squadron the necessity for a hospital there is very manifest." The hospital at Portsmouth, New Hampshire consisted of "only an old farmhouse, capable, at the utmost, of accommodating sixteen beds." The Surgeon General strongly, though unsuccessfully, urged the purchase of a new site and erection of a hospital and urged \$5,000 be appropriated for it. The statement of the Naval Hospital Fund showed \$73,809.04 on hand. A total of \$40,000 was estimated as the cost of current repairs at the naval hospitals and the naval laboratory for 1871.

There had been some question regarding the healthfulness of the situation of the Naval Hospital at Annapolis and a special board was appointed to investigate it. They made a report similar to the proverbial politicians' answer, "well yes, and then again no," and left the question unanswered. They noted there was no proper quarters for the surgeon and recommended that the old mansion house on the grounds be rehabilitated as a residence.

One of the requests in the Surgeon General's report was for a clerk (4th class) to transcribe records for the use of the Pension Office. Today when a hundred clerks are necessary for this work it is interesting to look back to the time when the need for the first clerk was requested to furnish medical records for the Commissioner of Pensions.

The average strength of the Navy in that year including officers, seamen, marines, engineer service, and Coast

and Geodetic Survey was "as near as can be ascertained about 11,819." The proportion of persons admitted to the sick list in relation to the whole number in the Navy was 1.02 or each person was on the sick list 1-2/100 times each year. The total deaths from all causes was 135.

There was a total of 14,704 cases treated during this year with 516 cases remaining under treatment at the end of the year. The total number of insane cases at St. Elizabeths Hospital for September 30, 1871 to September 30, 1872 was 44 with 32 cases remaining at the end of the period.

Medical Inspector Edward Shippen, the Fleet Surgeon in the European station made an inspection with a detailed report of the Medical School at Netley, England maintained by the War Office for postgraduate training of medical officers of both the Army and Navy. There was considerable agitation for a similar school for the Medical Corps of our Navy and it is probable that Dr. Shippen had been instructed to make this inspection and report. The Surgeon General in his annual report strongly urged the establishment of a similar school. He said: "This Bureau is now engaged in collecting and pre-

paring for publication all cases of pathological interest, hidden away in years and almost lost in its archives but we want the nucleus for a training school as at Netley; we want a place of deposit for marine collections by our own officers. To accomplish these ends, I propose the appropriation of \$15,000."

This appropriation was not obtained and it was many years and a number of Surgeons General had to repeat the recommendation before in 1902 the Naval Medical School was established.

Dr. Palmer retired for age, June 24, 1873. Little can be ascertained regarding him after his retirement. His death occurred April 24, 1883. There is a letter of that date from Surgeon General P. S. Wales to the Secretary of the Navy, Mr. W. E. Chandler, stating that Dr. Palmer had died that morning. The cause of death was given as chronic dysentery. Because the letter was of the same date as the death, it is unlikely that he died in Washington. Search for his place of burial has been unsuccessful.

His picture shows the Civil War officer of our Navy and with the beard and hair typical of that period.

